

first of 14 Snowy Owls in Iowa, and there were four in Missouri (Wehtje 2012) during the fall period. To the east, Indiana recorded its first fall Snowy Owl in Starke County on 18 November (Hengeveld et al. 2012).

In December, it was also clear that something major was about to happen or was already happening particularly during early winter and the Christmas Bird Count period (14 Dec – 5 Jan, LeBaron 2012). In Wisconsin just to our north 32 Snowy Owls were tallied on 16 CBCs, the most ever in that state, plus there were winter season reports from 40 counties according to Kavanagh (2012). In Illinois, five counts tallied six Snowy Owls (Sweet 2012), this was in keeping with our neighbor Indiana's four CBC Snowy Owls which tied their previous all-time high (Cassady 2012). Illinois CBC Snowy Owls were all recorded in northern Illinois with four along the lakefront, and two in the interior of the state at Illini and Decatur.

CBCs aside, December and January were the months of the most number of detections or reports of Snowy Owls in the state (See Figure 3). Forty-five Snowy Owls were reported in December and 35 in January with numbers tapering down to 30 and 20 in February and March respectively. March was a record warm month and many owls by mid-March were returning north; detections went significantly down in April and May with just three and four detections for those months (who's looking for Snowy Owls when there's green grass and lawn mowers going?). Looking at the overall detection map, see (Figure 1) and the 133 reports for the state, the lakefront reports of 14 and 52 reports for Lake and Cook counties, one could challenge that many of the reports might be duplicate sightings (and possibly some were, see methodology). In Lake County, 10 reports were lake-



*Snowy Owl with rabbit prey at Montrose, Chicago, Cook County. 18 December 2011. Photo by Jerry Goldner.*

front sightings and four were inland; in Cook County, 34 were lakefront reports and 18 detections were inland. Sixty-nine percent of the Snowy Owl detections statewide were inland as compared with 31 percent along the lakefront. (See Figures 4 and 5.) One can get a sense of this with the Figure 1 and the five reports at Midway Airport in Cook County, nine reports at O'Hare Airport, Cook County, five Snowy Owls noted in Champaign County; seven in Grundy County, and seven in McLean County (See Appendix.) Clearly the trend was that the Snowy Owls coming down the lakeshore moved farther south and inland. Also, it was interesting to note

that 16.6 percent of the Snowy Owl reports during this irruption season were at airports (19.6 percent if you add old Meigs Field in Chicago, Cook County which is now Northerly Island park).

In addition, lakefront observations showed a big fall off in numbers after December. Kanae Hirabayashi, a frequent birder at Montrose's Harbor and beach along Chicago's lakefront noted on IBET (Illinois Birders Exchanging Thoughts) that after mid-January she did not see another Snowy Owl until mid-February. Lake Michigan did not freeze this winter season and many owls, being unable to hunt ducks from a frozen lakefront, seemed to just push on for better hunting grounds and food sources. From mid-January through mid-February owls seemed to have settled into wintering territories and just a month later by mid-March many were on the return north, though after this major irruption several did linger into April and mid-May.

Unlike the previous irruptions of Snowy Owls during the winters of 1991/1992 (Johnson 1992) and



*Snowy Owl with Chicago skyline background. Cook County. Winter 2011-2012. Photo by Richard Remington.*